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Edwin M. Yoder Jr.

The Great Secrecy Inflation

Even if the courts eventually find John Walker Jr., his son and his brother guilty of the spying they're accused of, their case may serve more than one worthy purpose. For this most sensational of the rash of espionage cases may alert us to the lunatic dimensions, and risks, of the great secrecy inflation.

To say so is not to scoff at more traditional conceptions of the problem. For instance, Adm. Bobby Inman, former deputy director of Central Intelligence, has warned for years that the lax environment of high-tech industry (often defense-connected) breeds many incentives for theft. But few listened, even after one arrogant young flunky at TRW stole very sensitive secrets about U.S. surveillance satellites more or less on his lunch hour.

Somehow, the Walker story by virtue of its scale is different and shows signs of waking us up.

The secrecy industry is staggering. Some 4.3 million Americans are now cleared to work with secrets, and new applications for clearance have doubled in a decade. The backlog of such applications is now so thick at the Pentagon that clearance specialists can barely keep up. And (this may be the most pertinent fact of all) a typical clearance is reviewed only about every 17 years. That's time enough, almost, to carry off the Pentagon (or TRW) brick by brick.

But these figures are only the outcroppings of the tale, a tale of secrecy swelling beyond comprehension or manageable boundaries.

The late Rebecca West, foremost of the century's analysts of the psychology of treason, saw it coming. Twenty years ago she observed that treason was undergoing a metamorphosis. Where once it had usually sprung from ideology, or from political disaffection, it now had for the most part become sordidly mercenary, a thing done for pay or power. And above all, it was an aspect of inflation:

"The vast population excretes a number of documents so vast that a vast number of people have to be employed to work on them, so vast that it becomes impossible to buy their honesty by high wages and impossible to employ enough security officers to see that they keep their filing cupboards locked and take nothing secret home. The existence of a huge accumulation of unguarded secret documents extends the same invitation to thievery as the huge number of automobiles which have to be left in the street. . . ."

West certainly saw more deeply into the roots of the problem, even 20 years ago, than a former CIA official who glibly blames the recent spy-for-pay cases on the notorious self-indulgence of the "Me Generation."

That theory takes no account of the pandemic inflation that has ballooned, unto virtual incoherence, values in nearly every sector of life: from dollars to autos to grades to credit to secrecy to (it follows as day follows night) secret-stealing. It has become a multinational to rival all the others.

BY WASSERMAN

Espionage is no less ugly and dangerous than ever, of course, yet in this new environment it may have its redeeming compensations.

If in the United States 4.3 million people are cleared to handle "secrets," there are far more secrets, so-called, than mathematical odds or human nature would allow to be kept. Indeed, there must be many more "secrets" than are worth keeping in the first place—or stealing.

Of course, in the area of national military security the distinction, while crucial, is also problematical. The Walkers and their confederates are accused of stealing secrets related to naval equipment and operations. Some of those secrets are doubtless of very high value. But unless the Navy is very different from the other services, it's a good guess that some of its secrets fall into the ballooning category of high-tech clutter—weaponry and communications so complex as to be utterly unreliable. Spying that compromises the latter may, perversely, enhance our security.

Predictably, the cry has gone up that all the old security and counterintelligence techniques, however cumbersome or intrusive, need to be revved up once again. And it could come to that.

Another possible approach, however, is to think more boldly about the overblown reputation of secrecy in a high-tech world that seems to pass through several stages of obsolescence between breakfast and dinner every day.

Before we reinflate the security fetishes and techniques of the 1950s, we might pause to ask whether the mystique of secrecy, with 4.3 million licensed keepers, isn't in desperate need of deflation.